

Prologue

This book has been five years in the writing. I began it not fully knowing what compelled me to do so. I certainly didn't have to write it. There was no lucrative contract. My Department Chair at Penn State was not pressuring me to produce a book. On the surface, I did have a desire to share insights garnered from a lifetime of teaching, but there was something else, unspoken, festering inside of me, something itching to be released.

My collaborator, Dana L. Stuchul, suggested that I explore this inner itch by simply reflecting on my schooling history. She gave me questions to work with like: What does it mean for you to learn? When have you experienced genuine learning in your life? What's your proof? Who or what have been your teachers? How, if at all, have the things you have learned changed you and how have they influence your work as a teacher?

With these questions in hand, I went to my writing table. In ritualistic fashion I sharpened my pencil. Then I sat down and I waited. Nothing. I looked out the window. I gazed down at my writing pad. Nothing! Writing has always been a difficult process for me but this was excruciating. In an attempt to break free, I listened to music, I lit candles, I burned incense... Each of these things had a slight softening effect on me but still my writing was sluggish and muddled. Then one day I placed a photograph of myself, taken some sixty years ago when I was two-years old, on my writing table. Something cracked open inside me. Studying this photo, I was struck by the brightness and trust beaming from my innocent eyes. Was this me? As if an archaeologist, I then dug into my old grade-school pictures—first grade, second grade, fourth grade, sixth grade... what would I find? As I studied those photos, I noted how the sparkle—the innocence—in my two-year-old eyes seemed to dissolve with time, being replaced, it seemed, by a mixture of submission and melancholy. It was if I was witnessing, through time-lapse photography, a shroud of resignation and sadness descend over me. And it was then that I wondered if that *itch* inside me that longed to be exposed and faced was my deep unacknowledged sadness for all those years, growing up, I had spent indentured in classrooms.

In time, I found myself mourning for all that was lost and all that might have been. In effect, I was finally allowing myself to feel a kind of *wound* lodged inside me. This sense of woundedness, still palpable today, is about how schooling, despite its well-meaning intentions,

often tended to diminish my innate autonomy, creativity, curiosity, spontaneity, lightness-of-being, confidence, and more.

Kirsten Olsen in her book, Wounded by School, gives examples of school wounds. As you read her list (paraphrased), consider your own schooling history and how you may have been wounded by:

- The belief that you are not smart, not competent in learning.
- The belief that your abilities are fixed and cannot be improved with effort, coaching, intervention, or self-understanding.
- The belief that you are “just average” leaving you feeling diminished.
- Painful memories of shaming experiences in school that live on in you as generalized anxiety and a low appetite for intellectual risk taking.
- A tendency to classify others, and yourself, into dualistic, reductive “smart/dumb,” “artistic/not artistic” categories.
- A generalized loss of pleasure in learning.
- And, finally, unprocessed feelings about education and learning that you enact as an adult in your interactions with your own children or students.

It is likely that all adults, subjected to American compulsory schooling, who give themselves permission to reflect deeply on their schooling history, will see significant ways in which school has “wounded” them.

Our disinclination, as adults, to do a rigorous retrospective inquiry into our schooling history and schooling wounds is, it seems, a measure of schooling’s power to blind us to schooling’s impact on our minds and hearts. Admissions such as, “Yeah, I hated school” or “Yeah, school was boring” or, “I wasn’t any good at school” are rarely followed with a critique focusing on how the structure of school or the dominant teaching methods or even the purposes of schooling engender such sentiments in us. Instead, graduates or even drop-outs interiorize the inherent flaws in the *system*, making them their own (Illich, 1971).

In my case, as I began to name my particular school wounds I confess to experiencing a mixture of naughtiness and giddiness. The *naughtiness* came from the culturally instilled belief that I had no right to complain about school as an institution. Instead, I should be grateful for the opportunity—the privilege!—I had to go to school. After all, isn’t school unquestionably good and aren’t complainers, like me, simply people who didn’t measure up in school? In contrast, my

giddiness sourced itself in the relief I experienced as I gave myself permission to speak things that I had hitherto been unaware of and/or afraid to speak—things that I was finally recognizing to be true in the depths of my being.

Overall, acknowledging my school wounds—*my itch*—has served an important purpose for it has been through naming and mourning these wounds that, in some measure, I have been able to release myself from them.

The Central Purpose of this Book

In hindsight I now see that this book traces its earliest origins to a time ten years ago when I began to craft a course at Penn State aimed at preparing a group of fifteen students (with no prior teaching experience) to assume the role of teacher. The students were selected from among 300 who had just taken my *Developing Ecological Consciousness* course. My aim was to prepare these students to teach, single-handedly, a weekly break-out section of this *Ecological Consciousness* course the following year.

Normally students spend their entire college career preparing to become teachers and yet there I was attempting to achieve—some might say “naively,” “absurdly” or “arrogantly”—this goal by means of a solitary 3-credit course. Given the immensity of the challenge and the limited time available, I decided to ground my entire course in Parker Palmer’s dictum, *We teach who we are*. Specifically, I wanted my students—soon-to-be teachers—to experience themselves as empowered and aligned with life. At the time I had little notion of how to achieve this goal, but, year after year, as I have persisted in refining this course, answers have emerged as evidenced in each of this book’s six chapters.

Chapter 1: Teaching as if Life Doesn't Matter: There is nothing more precious than LIFE! And yet humans everywhere are fouling their environment rendering Planet Earth less able to support life. We are also killing each other—no other species kills its own kind on such a massive scale as *Homo sapiens*. And as a final affront to life, we often hasten our own death—e.g., through our addictive behaviors, we literally eat, worry, and rush ourselves to death. This chapter is an exposé on how conventional schooling, in spite of rhetoric to the contrary, is *anti-life* in so far as it often separates, even alienates, both teachers and students from life. This is the problem. The response, elaborated throughout the remainder of this book is an approach to teaching and learning whose aims differ markedly from those that currently dominate

educational discourse and practice. Our intention: To bring life and relatedness out from the educational shadows and silences and into the light ... in short, to promote *teaching as if life matters!*

Chapter 2: Teaching as if Feelings Matter: To be human is to have a body. Yet, modern schooling generally ignores the body, treating it simply as a conveyance for transporting our brains from place to place. So it is that teachers and students often see their feeling bodies as encumbrances—e.g., something that can cause embarrassment and that must be disciplined. However, to *Teach as if Life Matters* is to recognize that our feelings (arising within our bodies) are the “life force” running through us. As such, feelings and emotions act as catalysts, inviting teachers (and by extension students) to know themselves, the human *other*, and the world more fully. The principles and practices presented in this chapter illustrate how our feeling bodies have much to teach us, both within and outside the classroom, provided we pay attention.

Chapter 3: Loving the Questions—Relationship With Mind: To be human is to have a curious mind. Good teachers are curious. They nurture a relationship with their intellect by asking thought-provoking questions of themselves and others and by creating a question-friendly environment in their classrooms. Such teachers recognize that asking questions is the most potent intellectual tool that humankind has ever developed because questions motivate us to *quest* for knowledge and wisdom. In this chapter, beyond extolling the power of questions to catalyze learning, we showcase a spectrum of approaches that we use to help teachers and students become more skilled in the art of asking questions that truly matter, drawing both into a deeper relationship with their mind.

Chapter 4: Seeing Ourselves With New Eyes—Relationship With Self: Beyond the relationship we teachers have with our feeling bodies and our intellects, is the all-encompassing relationship we have with our selves. Contemporary culture—with its frequent emphasis on judgment, comparison, competition, speed, money and possessions—often tends to undermine our relationship with our selves. On top of this, our education system, rather than encouraging introspection and self-knowledge, often promulgates the myth that meaning and happiness come through external sources. The result, for both teachers and students, is often a sense of unworthiness and even self-loathing. In this chapter we share stories about the crippling effects of self-alienation while offering practices for cultivating self-love, both inside and outside the classroom.

Chapter 5: Cultivating Classroom Kinship—Relationship With the Human “Other”: A teacher’s relationship with her body-mind-self (Ch. 2, 3, 4) provides the foundation for extending understanding and compassion to the human *other*, particularly to her students. Indeed, as teachers, we have a choice in how we perceive the students who enter our classrooms. We can objectify them, seeing them as *empty containers* that we must *fill* with information. Or we can see their unique personhood and convey to them, through our speech and actions, that their interests and feelings and desires matter to us. It is the teacher’s communication and listening skills, more than anything else, we submit, that determine the quality of her relationships with her students. In this chapter we invite readers to explore how common habits of mind (e.g., dualistic thinking, labeling, judging, blaming) create communication styles that lead to separation and dysfunction in our relationships. As an antidote to the status quo, we share the communication approaches and techniques that we use to cultivate kinship in our classrooms.

Chapter 6: We Are Expressions of Everything—Relationship With Earth and Cosmos: All too often, as modern humans, we live indoor lives, conscripted to a simulacra existence. Tragically, contemporary schooling often fails to recognize our vital connection to the living physical reality that is Planet Earth, much less to the generative Cosmos that is the ground of all creation. Mired in a human-constructed world, we become separate from vital truths of existence! The relationship that we have to the living Earth and Cosmos changes irrevocably as we awaken to the realization that all beings are made of the same stuff, all part of the same unfolding of “intelligences,” all interacting and fitting together like pieces of an enormous tapestry. In this chapter, we offer an array of explorations and practices designed to bring teachers (and their students) into a relationship with Earth and Cosmos marked by affinity and a deep sense of belonging.

A Collaborative Effort

From the early stages of this book’s conceptualization to its completion I was graced to have my colleague and partner, Dana L. Stuchul, serve as a guide, provocateur, contributor and editor. We are both teachers writing to teachers about the relationships that make up a teacher’s life. And not just relationships with our colleagues and students but also the precious relationship each of us has with ourselves, as well as our relationship with Earth—the planet that has birthed us and that sustains us.

Through inquiring into our own pedagogical struggles and through our efforts to make sense of our learning and teaching histories, the purpose for this book became clear—to invite teachers at all levels to join us in placing relationship at the center of teaching and learning. Why this focus on relationship? It's simple! Everything that happens—from the level of the cells that comprise our bodies to the mysterious workings of the Cosmos that encompasses us—is a story of relationship. Given this formulation, anything that ruptures or undermines relationship is, in effect, *anti-life*. And it is our contention (based on more than fifty years of combined teaching experience in a variety of school settings) that schools and their dominant pedagogies often do just that—i.e., they undermine relationship with Self, Other, Earth and Cosmos—to our collective peril.

This perspective shares much in common with work in the fields of Holistic and Transformative Education. Contemporary holistic educators take issue with the traditional American education agenda (as do we), in so far as it is imposed (compulsory) and largely limited to cognitive pursuits and to ends which constrict human potential. Rather than restricting education to the cognitive realm, holistic educators aim to create learning environments that nurture the whole person and, in so doing, foster self-actualization (J. Miller, 1996, 2006; R. Miller, 1997). In a complimentary vein, advocates of transformative education seek to create learning environments that challenge young people to question their habits of mind, their beliefs, their world view so that they might become less controlled by their social conditioning and, ultimately, more self-actualizing. O'Sullivan (2003) describes it this way:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves ... our relationships with other humans and with the natural world.

Central to both holistic and transformative education is the question, “What do humans need to learn to live meaningful lives?” The answer, we contend, lies in relationship! It is through the cultivation of relationship that we humans find meaning and purpose and discover our place in the family of life.

In the end, to *Teach as if Life Matters* is to ground education in the healing of the fractured relationships we have with ourselves and the world. In so far as *relationship* is the

essence of life, the challenge for teachers is to become *Relationship Masters*. This can and will occur, we believe, when teachers have the support and motivation to actively devote themselves to their own self-actualization. Indeed, the best teachers are masters of themselves as well as their subject matter (Schmier, 2005). Such teachers offer their students a powerful model of what it means to be fully and authentically human!

The expression of our full humanity is precisely what these times call for. We believe that if human culture is to flourish in the new millennia, teachers will need to become fearless agents of transformation. Nina Simmons (2005) put this challenge in an educational context when she wrote: “To navigate the wild changes ahead, decrease the violence of this tumultuous time, and shift our civilization’s direction, we will need to invest the same authority and value in our relational intelligence and learning as we’ve previously given to our intellectual development. If we can do that, we will build a contagious energy that will ultimately lead to real healing and restoration... of our deep and fundamental interdependence with each other, other species, and the whole interwoven web of creation.”

Make no mistake: We teachers *are* especially well positioned to act as agents of transformation in so far as our influence extends, both deep and wide, first to the students in our classrooms and then, as our students step from our classrooms into the world—to society as a whole.